

Confessional Illiberalism in Europe

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of confessional illiberalism and situates it alongside two other forms of illiberalism: prejudicial illiberalism and reactionary illiberalism. Confessional illiberalism emerges as a reactionary backlash against secularism and gender equality, drawing ideological inspiration from interwar fascism. It adopts a model of governance that fuses the state with religious intermediary organizations, such as churches and socially conservative advocacy groups. Whereas confessional illiberalism constitutes an epistemic rejection of modernity and aspires to a restoration of conservative traditionalism, prejudicial illiberalism originates at the individual level as a grievance and may escalate into a mass movement. Positioned between individual-level prejudice and state-level redemption offered by confessionalism, reactionary illiberalism entails a policy-based pushback against the advancement of aspirational or ascending minority groups. Confessional illiberalism, by embedding itself within religious intermediary organizations and segments of uncivil society, cultivates a deep-rooted institutional presence that becomes difficult to dislodge once it consolidates power.

Keywords

democracy; far right; gender; illiberalism; minority rights; policy backlash; populism; prejudice; religion

1. Introduction

In Western societies, mothers have unexpectedly become burdened with the expectation of “making nations great again,” a demand that reflects anxieties about national viability. This rhetoric echoes earlier pronatalist campaigns, such as the 19th-century slogan of the Hungarian Association for the Protection of Mother and Infants: “Hungarian mothers, you can make Hungary great!”—a call issued in response to high infant

mortality rates (Hungarian National Stefánia Association for the Protection of Mothers and Infants, 1915). Today, the redemptive vision of womanhood is directed less toward reducing infant deaths and more toward addressing declining birth rates, yet it remains grounded in ideals of fertility, subservience, tradition, and unwavering dedication to family and community. It underpins a wave of recent policy shifts across several European countries: the rollback of abortion rights in Poland and the US; state-sponsored subsidies and child benefits in Hungary, aimed at encouraging procreation among middle-class married couples; and orphaning by decree of same-sex parents in Italy. Together, these developments reflect a broader ideological project that seeks to reassert traditional gender roles under the guise of national renewal.

Many of the challenges associated with the waning dominance of the liberal democratic order in European democracies and beyond have been studied through the lens of populism (Kaltwasser et al., 2017) or interpreted as symptomatic of the rise of illiberalism, a reactionary rejection of market liberalism and social progressivism (Laruelle, 2024). While most literature identifies the divisiveness of anti-LGBTQ+ politics and the assault on reproductive rights as a tool to polarize the electorate by dragging voters into culture wars, it fails to see the redemptive nature of pro-natality politics for illiberal actors. For these actors, the rebirth of the nation can be achieved with reproductive policies tailored to the state's interests aimed at producing a new generation dedicated to traditional values that ensure national survival. To account for this logic, we propose a new concept of confessional illiberalism, which captures the centrality of motherhood for illiberal national rejuvenation.

To justify the introduction of confessional illiberalism, we compare it with two other ideal types of illiberalism in Europe: prejudicial illiberalism and reactionary illiberalism. Prejudicial illiberalism is rooted in bottom-up individual anxieties, manifested through hate, xenophobia, and resentment. Reactionary illiberalism is a form of policy backlash against policy accommodation and expansion of rights afforded to ethnic and sexual minorities, including women. Confessional illiberalism represents a reactionary backlash against secularism and gender equality, drawing ideological inspiration from interwar fascism. It adopts a model of governance that fuses the state with religious intermediary institutions, such as churches and socially conservative advocacy groups.

Whereas confessional illiberalism constitutes an epistemic rejection of modernity and aspires to return to conservative traditionalism, prejudicial illiberalism originates at the individual level as a grievance, which can escalate into a mass movement under politically talented leaders. Positioned between the personal prejudices of individuals and state-driven redemption offered by confessionalism, reactionary illiberalism entails a policy-based pushback against the advancement of aspirational or ascending minority groups. Confessional illiberalism, through its entrenchment in both religious intermediary organizations and segments of uncivil society, achieves a deep-rooted institutional presence that becomes difficult to dislodge once it consolidates power.

Some distinct features of confessional illiberalism are its strategic effort to form alliances with intermediary actors and socially conservative advocacy groups (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023) and its politicization of civil society (Bernhard, 2020; Greskovits, 2020), which leads to divisions translated into electoral gains (Pirro & Stanley, 2022). Our typology of illiberalisms examines the origins of discontent and manifestations of backlash directed at groups targeted by illiberal policies. While the political consequences of illiberalism in contemporary democracies are far-reaching and detrimental to democracy, this article focuses instead on understanding the intertwined social and political origins of illiberalism's exclusionary dimensions.

To understand its roots, we identify groups most frequently subjected to illiberal policies: women, migrants, Muslims, Jews, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Table 1 outlines the major differences between prejudicial, reactionary, and confessional illiberalisms. The grievances driving prejudicial illiberalism stem from emotional responses at the individual level. Reactionary illiberalism operates at the meso-level as it seeks to reverse the policy gains of the aspirational groups. In contrast, confessional illiberalism constitutes a revolt against the modern, secular state (Hanson & Kopstein, 2024). Its main goal is to integrate the state with intermediary advocacy groups and organizations shaped by religious values. Confessional illiberalism emerges through the alignment of state power with either formal religion or religiously inspired (un)civil society actors, all of which promote traditional views of the family tied to the national ingroup. Family becomes a politicized cornerstone of state identity, legitimizing the expansion of state-led regulatory frameworks in the realms of intimacy and reproduction. Through the fusion of state authority with religious and familial ideologies, confessional illiberalism consolidates political power and reshapes social norms to strengthen loyalty to the nation-state and reinforce the patriarchal authority of the national ingroup in private and public domains.

While confessional illiberalism is an epistemic rejection of modernity with the aspiration to return to the traditionalism of the nation's perceived heyday, prejudicial illiberalism manifests itself initially as a grievance at the individual level. It is fueled by personal hate that can escalate to mass resentment against minorities.

Table 1. Typology of three illiberalisms in Europe.

	Prejudicial	Reactionary	Confessional
Origin of grievance	Individual emotion	Programmatic policy shift	Episteme of a modern state
Level of change	Micro-level change in prejudicial views of individuals	Meso-level change in the balance of power between the dominant and the aspirational group	Macro-level change driven by efforts to undermine a secular state and fuse it with socially conservative advocacy groups and religious organizations
Vehicles of change	A mass party or a far-right movement party that weaponizes individual prejudice to forge mass resentment through scapegoating	Politicized advocacy for ethnic and sexual minorities leads to backlash against accommodative policies	Religious groups, advocacy groups, and uncivil society facilitate fusion with ruling parties that change the state
Consequence	Intimidation of targets by the hateful core of the far right, party-sponsored violence	Reversal of gains, reversal of minority rights, and accommodative policies	De-secularized state, new social contract, changes in regulatory frameworks of reproduction, sexuality, and minority protection, emphasis on "in-group" motherhood
Illustrative cases	National Socialist German Workers' Party and Alternative for Germany in Germany	Slovak National Party in Slovakia	Unity Party, Fidesz in Hungary; and National Fascist Party (PNF) and Fratelli d'Italia in Italy

In between personalistic prejudice and state-led national redemption via political confessionalism lies reactionary illiberalism, a policy pushback against aspirational and ascending minorities that seeks to roll back their advancement.

Confessional illiberalism is a sub-variant of illiberalism. Most studies of illiberalism juxtapose it to liberal democracy and dwell on mechanisms and strategies of institutional erosion. Zakaria's (1997) seminal work on the rise of illiberal democracy referred to a regime where leaders are democratically elected but erode freedoms, undermine constitutional checks and balances, and promote majoritarianism. Similarly, Pappas (2019) attributes the rise of illiberalism to leaders who are bound by democratic systems but seek to weaken liberal institutions, including the rule of law and minority protections. Bermeo's (2016) work on democratic erosion identifies leaders as the main culprits of shifts towards illiberalism and democratic decline, via electoral manipulation, expansion of executive powers, and strategic polarization. Grasping the origins and diffusion of illiberalism, through parties and leaders, leads to a better understanding of how different forms of illiberalism destabilize democratic systems through restricting judicial independence, curbing media freedoms, and undermining checks and balances (e.g., Scheppele, 2022).

The institutional perspective offers incisive analytical tools to pronounce democracy dead or dying (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019), swerving (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017), or re-democratizing (Bill & Stanley, 2025). However, institutional approaches to illiberalism, with their focus on elite-driven divisive politics, neglect the ideational roots of illiberal parties. Additionally, illiberal parties, especially in opposition, can co-exist in liberal democratic regimes without contributing to decay. Laruelle (2021) defines illiberalism as an ideology that is in a permanent situational relationship to liberalism. In her view, illiberalism is a reaction to a contemporary, lived-in experience of liberalism. Ideational approaches to illiberalism have the advantage of seeing linkages between illiberal actors across regimes and seemingly inconsequential power balances between liberals and illiberals within regimes.

Ideational approaches can detect the impact of illiberal transnational socially conservative networks, such as those associated with the European Center for Law and Justice that seek to unite the political influence of evangelicals in the US to Catholics in Europe and Eastern Orthodoxy in Russia (Kopecká, 2024). Within regimes, ideational approaches are better at assessing the buoyance of the breeding ground of illiberalism, for example by monitoring (un)civil society (Bernhard, 2020; Chambers & Kopstein, 2001).

We agree that illiberalism is an ideational backlash against liberalism in the cultural sphere and the political realm of minority protection, and at times is bundled with a revolt against neoliberal economic reforms. However, Enyedi's (2020) study of Orban's leadership underscores the need for viewing illiberalism both as an ideology *and* as a set of institutionally entrenched tools to stay in power, especially when it redefines the state and offers a new social contract between voters and leaders.

2. Definitional Boundaries of Confessional Illiberalism: Illiberalism, Fascism, and Populism

Illiberalism, as an ideological rejection of recent experiences with liberalism, is thin and reactive (Laruelle, 2021). However, it also implies a rejection of liberal democratic values by states, civic organizations, parties, social movements, and ordinary people. The confessional variant of illiberalism can be understood with the

help of a historical approach to learn about its appeal, formation, and endurance. While conceptually distinct from both fascism and populism, it represents a “thicker” variant of illiberalism.

The institutional embedding of confessional illiberalism draws its inspiration from inter-war fascism. However, it is less violent and, as it befits all illiberalisms, tends to derive legitimacy from elections, even if the playing field of party competition is tilted (de la Torre, 2025). Griffin and Feldman (2008, p. 42) define interwar fascism as a revolutionary form of populist ultranationalism premised on the myth of national rebirth, which aims to purge decadence: fascism opposed liberalism and was endorsed by church leadership to avert the dangers of Bolshevism.

Fascism and confessional illiberalism are reactive, as both emerged from discontent with the inefficiencies of (parliamentary) liberal democracy. Although historically liberalism as a political system was less hegemonic than today’s liberalism, the rise of fascism responded to perceived and fabricated grievances, enacted minority oppression, and, to boost fertility and state loyalty, politicized families (Bosworth, 2007).

Violence is where confessional illiberalism and fascism depart. The militancy of fascism was enabled by the atrocities of World War I, which rendered the killing of ethnic outgroups and religious minorities to facilitate national rebirth acceptable to the masses. Confessional illiberalism also seeks national rebirth, but through renewing traditional family structures and ingroup communitarianism. The rise of illiberalism coincides with the Covid-19 crisis, which brought two important changes. First, in setting vaccination priorities and the scope of shutdowns, states overtly determined deservingness of the vaccine and care. This broke the premise of liberal societies that all lives are equal. In doing so, states desensitized citizens to indirect state-sanctioned bodily harm through restrictions on care.

Second, as states closed schools and employees started to work from home, many found themselves at home with their children and partners. Closures elevated the power of families. Parenting became political when states shifted educational responsibilities mostly to mothers and empowered parents to intervene in schooling practices set by states. Economic and health crises enhanced the appeal of confessional illiberalism due to its emphasis on reciprocal obligations tied to homophily, communal bonds of national solidarity, and emphasis on traditional families as a primary unit to withstand hardship. For confessional illiberalism, the suppression of “decadent” lifestyles serves to restrict the ability of individuals, particularly women of childbearing age with career ambitions, to opt out of traditional roles and responsibilities, in the name of national preservation.

Is confessional illiberalism populist? The short answer is no. Populism presumes a direct, unmediated relationship between the leadership and the people (cf. Geva, 2024, p. 7). Confessional illiberalism is built around a synergistic triangle of the ruling party (in the ideal case), religious and conservative advocacy groups, and the people. Confessional illiberalism is closest to Enyedi’s (2024) concept of religious illiberalism, which challenges liberal democracy by building collective identification around religious dogmas and symbols. A transformative thick ideology of outgroup exclusion and ingroup growth in cohesion greases the fusion of the state with confessional advocacy groups.

However, illiberalism (without adjectives) and populism share common traits. They are both adaptive thin ideologies that need a thicker host ideology to survive. They both embrace majoritarianism as a disfiguration of democracy (Urbinati, 2014). While not inherently autocratic, illiberalism and populism often rely on elections

to derive legitimacy, even when competition is only partially free and fair (de la Torre, 2025). Finally, illiberalism and populism, unlike fascism, do not worship war for national expansion but might selectively weaponize militant groups against target groups.

Populism primarily functions as a political style, pitting the disillusioned masses against a “corrupt” elite. Illiberalism, by contrast, serves as an ideological engine that underpins populist rhetoric. Unlike populism, which rhetorically unites the masses against elites, illiberalism fragments the public by targeting specific social groups rather than elite actors. Illiberalism is manifested through protectionist, chauvinistic, and exclusionary policies. While illiberalism at the state level is often a result of a top-down process of democratic erosion, we emphasize linkages between the state and both uncivil and civil society. Our analysis focuses on three levels: social groups strategically targeted by illiberal parties (at the micro-level), the responses and alignments of other parties (meso-level), and democratic outcomes (macro-level). Table 2 summarizes similarities and major distinctions between confessional illiberalism and other relevant “isms.”

Our typology of three forms of illiberalism draws on both ideational and strategic approaches. While we emphasize the ideational foundations of all three forms as well as identify the specific social groups that they target, we also examine the strategic alliances forged between illiberal leaders and societal actors. These alliances explain the persistence and entrenchment of illiberalism(s) as well as their varying propensities to inflict democratic decay. By integrating three levels of analysis—the state, the party, and the people—we provide an account of the origins, mechanisms, and democratic implications of illiberalism(s), assessing threats to liberal democratic principles.

Table 2. Confessional illiberalism and other “-isms.”

	Confessional Illiberalism	
	Similarities	Differences
Populism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thin ideology • Majoritarianism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct linkage between leaders and the masses is not necessary • Leaders claim moral authority • Forms deliberate linkages with intermediary non-state organizations
Fascism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communitarianism • Ingroup motherhood • Ingroup redemption • Linkages with (un)civil organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-revolutionary, but seeks a new social contract • Revisionist approach to support heteronormative hierarchies and families • Non-violent, yet uses intimidation • Linkages formed to shape public opinion and to steer support for policy
Nationalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusionary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of religious rhetoric and religious symbols as a political strategy to subdue political opposition and justify changes in policy • No ethnic foundation, but uses religious rhetoric and symbolism to delineate the boundaries of the nation
Authoritarianism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undercuts free and fair elections as needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Derives legitimacy from elections, even if measures are taken to weaken procedural legitimacy • Derives moral legitimacy from religious symbolism

3. Prejudicial Illiberalism: Scapegoating and Resentment

Prejudice-based illiberal parties are driven by xenophobic, racist, antisemitic, and exclusionary rhetoric rooted in segments of (un)civil society. They target groups seen as incompatible with the nation's founding myth and idealized past, often focusing on racial and racialized ethnic minorities. While these parties struggle to govern nationally today, their destabilizing impact on democracy hinges on securing a coalition partner in parliament.

Prejudice-based illiberal parties emerge when xenophobic and racist attitudes held by a minority of voters become politically salient due to a combination of shifts in party systems and societal anxieties. These parties are formed with the help of a politically crafty leader as small groups become emboldened to express sincere beliefs and vote for far-right nationalist political parties (Valentin, 2024). Over time, movements capture existing political parties or form new ones as they capitalize on pre-existing resentments rooted in the ingroup's perceived cultural and economic displacement to attract a diverse coalition of resentful voters that extends beyond the movement's initial base. We compare the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to illustrate historical and contemporary dynamics that give rise to prejudice-based illiberalism. Both parties target similar groups and rely on an ideological foundation fueled by scapegoating and resentment.

3.1. *The NSDAP*

The NSDAP's rise from the political fringes to dominance is widely studied, with scholars attributing Hitler's rise to power to a broad coalition of support. Resentment towards structural conditions, whether real or perceived, enabled the Nazi party to scapegoat economic and cultural groups, fueling its ascent. The NSDAP consolidated power by altering democratic institutions as they channeled scapegoating propaganda through media and education (Koonz, 2005; Lewy, 2001; Steinweis, 2008; Voigtländer & Voth, 2015, pp. 7935 and Appendix 8).

Political sociologists relying on prior work by historians pioneered theories of how hateful illiberal ideologies spread beyond a core group of ideologues in prewar Nazi Germany. The NSDAP mobilized disillusioned voters across demographics through civil networks, channeling resentment against the Weimar regime into scapegoating ideologies (Berman, 1997; Brustein, 1996; Chambers & Kopstein, 2001, pp. 845–848; Hamilton, 1982; Riley, 2010; Satyanath et al., 2017). The NSDAP's "hate groups are the ideological nurseries of ideas that can form the core of much more pernicious larger associations"; they attract both nationalist ideologues and sway disaffected ingroup members (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001, p. 844).

Meanwhile, political scientists highlight the governing conservatives' failure to neutralize Hitler's far-right faction (Ziblatt, 2017). Hamilton (1982) and Berman (2019) link hate, resentment, and elite miscalculations, showing how the NSDAP exploited antisemitism while capitalizing on economic downturns and political failures (Berman, 2019). In other words, the convergence of factors—resentment fueled by macro-level conditions and the organizational failures of dominant political parties—was crucial in facilitating the rise of the NSDAP.

3.2. AfD

Today, prejudicial illiberal parties, particularly in Germany, are constrained by domestic and international democratic safeguards (Capoccia, 2013, p. 211). However, as Ziblatt (2017) and Berman (2019) observe, these parties exploit societal fractures marked by resentment and risk to gain influence (Betz, 2023, pp. 61–64; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022). The NSDAP and AfD's years of bottom-up mobilization before achieving large-scale parliamentary gains underscore the essential groundwork these parties must lay before ascending to power. During this period, widespread resentment toward economic and cultural shifts facilitated the parties' alignment with hate-driven movements, amplifying grievances and normalizing exclusion as a precursor to political power (Valentim, 2024).

In the 2025 German federal election, the AfD achieved a historic breakthrough, securing 20.8% of the vote and becoming the second-largest party in the Bundestag. This grants the AfD substantial legislative influence with the potential to reshape Germany's political landscape to further propagate exclusionary policies (not just narratives) by normalizing far-right nativist views within mainstream politics. The party's rhetoric, which frames racialized migrants, Jews, Romani, and other marginalized groups as threats to European, not just German, identity, has been linked to a rise in xenophobic and antisemitic violence (Dancygier, 2023).

3.3. *Targets of Prejudice-Based Illiberal Parties: Migrants, Jews, and Romani*

Antisemitism is an ideology rooted in conspiratorial narratives of Jewish power; its usually insidious hate is targeted at Jews, an ethno-religious group racialized in the 19th century by European nationalist socialists. While the content of the messaging adapts to the context, antisemitism, or Jew-hate (*Judenhass*), is derived from the conspiracy theory that Jews control the state. In contrast, racism is based on the conspiracy theory and fear that racial outgroups burden the state and its resources. Overt scapegoating narratives generalize to groups that pose a threat to the nativist vision of prejudicial illiberal parties, with economic concerns often veiling prejudicial and exclusionary rhetoric and policy. The AfD has made anti-immigration policy central to its platform, depicting migrants as economic burdens and an existential threat to German, though not Judeo-Christian culture, even in areas with low migration rates (Entorf & Lange, 2023; Wagner et al., 2020). During the 2015 migrant crisis, the 2013-founded AfD profited from the economic and cultural scapegoating of migrants as it rose to prominence, eventually becoming mainstream during the Covid-19 pandemic (Dilling, 2018; Volk & Weisskircher, 2024). The party portrays migrants as criminals and invaders, echoing the antisemitic conspiracy of cultural Bolshevism (*Kulturbolschewismus*) peddled during Nazi Germany.

Despite Germany's legal protections against antisemitism, the AfD manipulates Nazi memory for political gain, fostering an environment where hate and violence against outgroups thrive (Dancygier, 2023; Dilling & Krawatzek, 2024; Entorf & Lange, 2023). In the rare cases where the party acknowledges German culpability for World War II, this admission serves to excuse its antisemitism to justify anti-immigration policies for the sake of curbing "imported" antisemitism, another instance of scapegoating (Dilling & Krawatzek, 2024, p. 1310).

Prejudicial illiberal parties perpetuate stereotypes and scapegoats to embolden and justify far-right illiberal ideologies, where rights are earned, not given. This contributes to increased violence by far-right networks,

including neo-Nazi groups, which the AfD tacitly enables (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Klikauer, 2019, p. 244; Volk & Weisskircher, 2024). Although migration patterns have shifted since the pre-war era, long-established communities like the Romani remain targets, as the AfD portrays them as welfare abusers and criminals, reinforcing long-standing stereotypes with historic roots (Geva, 2024, p. 19). In short, the AfD, often through affiliated hate groups, spreads conspiratorial narratives portraying Jews as state puppeteers, Romani as societal leeches, and migrants as cultural interlopers, reinforcing long-standing stereotypes about the burdens and controllers of the state, which turn economic and social anxieties into prejudicial resentment.

4. Reactionary Illiberalism: Policy Backlash

Reactionary illiberalism is a form of policy backlash that seeks to reverse gains of ascending minorities via programmatic policy contestation. The aspirational ascent of groups, driven by policy changes enacted by mainstream parties, often in coalitions with progressive and ethnic parties, creates an “extreme reaction” and impetus to reverse gains (Bustikova, 2020). This form of illiberalism is reactionary because it targets specific groups—ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, career-driven women, refugees, guest workers, and religious minorities. These real or imagined grievances stem from changes in the *policy* landscape (Bustikova, 2020; Dancygier, 2010).

In a comparative study of post-communist democracies, Bustikova (2020) demonstrates that contestation over language rights and the expansion of ethnic minority rights fuel radical right mobilization. Similarly, in Latin America, the rise of the far right can be understood as a socially conservative backlash triggered by “the shift in the status quo concerning majority–minority relations...linked to issues of gender and sexual identity” (Kaltwasser et al., 2024, p. 11). In the US, affirmative action policies and executive orders aimed at improving the standing of undocumented children of migrants have been linked to policy backlash against the Obama administration and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Major et al., 2016; Mutz, 2018).

Reactionary illiberalism is flimsy; it waxes and wanes with accommodation and, paradoxically, when rights are reversed, it can subside. It is not rooted in a particular cleavage structure or responsive to articulations, prejudice, or structural grievances. It is facilitated by the ability of (mostly) small groups to engage in collective action for policy concessions from the state and the majority. As such, the presence of small minority groups and the political advocates who fight on their behalf fuel reactionary illiberalism.

Reactionary illiberalism is derived from programmatic competition between parties that anchor policy “extremes” on both sides of the political spectrum, such as far-right parties and ethnic parties, or progressive parties that advocate for expanding minority rights of ethnic and sexual groups, including gender. Competition over policy in the identity domain, such as migration policies, welfare allocations to asylum seekers, or regulations of minority instruction in schools, requires the administrative capacity to expand and shrink public goods provision. Reactionary illiberalism ideally resides in a party system based on programmatic competition (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018) over policies that regulate majority–minority relations. This is important given that policy backlash, more than prejudice, has been shown to drive far-right voting (Rydgren, 2008).

One example of a reactionary illiberal party is the Slovak National Party (SNS), established in 1871, one of Europe’s most electorally successful far-right parties and the oldest party in Slovakia. It served in six governing

coalitions with the aim of curbing the rights of the Hungarian ethnic minority. This exemplifies the logic of the policy backlash. The SNS spearheaded restrictive language laws, policies, and regulatory measures in the 1990s and early 2000s that reduced funds for the schooling of Hungarian children and imposed fines on the usage of the Hungarian language in public domains.

The SNS's direct competitor was the party that defended the rights and aspirations of the Hungarian minority. As the political representatives in parliament and governments pushed for more rights for the Hungarians, the SNS was ready to reverse those gains at every window of opportunity, especially when they became junior partners in governing coalitions. Pushback against the expansion of rights, not prejudice towards the Hungarian minority, was the driving force of contestation. Bustikova (2020) has shown that the voters of the SNS were no more or less prejudicial towards Hungarians, an ethnic minority with formidable political backing, than voters of other parties. What distinguished their voters was an opposition to the expansion of Hungarian language rights and the political assertiveness of a small ethnic group that comprises about 8% of the Slovak population.

After Slovakia gained independence in 1993, Slovak identity politics oscillated between these two poles, nationalists and advocates for outgroup Hungarians, until the elections of 2016. Then, Prime Minister Fico emerged weaker than expected from the elections and was forced to form a coalition with both the SNS and representatives of the ethnic Hungarian party. Competitive language wars between the two parties ceased for an extended period. The status quo was broken in November 2024, when the SNS, yet again a coalition partner of Fico, but without the Hungarian party, resurrected the issue of language rights and proposed laws to (yet again) impose steep fines on using the Hungarian language in the public domain (Szalay, 2024).

These efforts are not driven by the surge of anti-Hungarian sentiments but represent an effort of the SNS to revamp its appeal in the face of declining vote shares. Voters over the years have signaled a preference for independent candidates running on the SNS party list and for more extreme groups advocating to suppress the rights of the Hungarian minority. Therefore, the seemingly calm status quo between the Hungarian minority party and the Slovak majority party that was in place between 2016 and 2024 has been disrupted by the electoral calculus of SNS, aiming to return to its glory days marked by incessant language law wars and reliable vote shares.

5. Confessional Illiberalism

Reactionary illiberalism emerges as a policy-driven response to processes of liberalization. In contrast, a characteristic of confessional illiberalism is its fusion of religious authority with party politics (Geva, 2024). Whereas prejudice-based illiberalism mobilizes from below through scapegoating narratives, and reactionary illiberalism advances programmatic policies from above, confessional illiberal parties leverage religious and civil organizations to mediate state-society relations (Greskovits, 2020; Grzymala-Busse, 2016; Wittenberg, 2006).

Confessional illiberalism derives its ideological foundation from a strategic alliance between religious organizations and political parties—an alliance that may or may not have risen to power through reactionary means. While many confessionally illiberal parties advance seemingly progressive social policy, the ideological or functional fusion of religion and party politics necessarily denies certain social groups the

agency and autonomy afforded to others. The rejection of liberalism results in policies that institutionalize and deepen political inequalities, privileging Christian versus “non-Christian” values, heterosexuality versus homosexuality, and traditional gender roles versus women’s autonomy.

Confessional illiberal parties in the interwar period targeted ethno-religious minorities—including Jews and Roma—through legal restrictions on education, civil marriage, and military enrollment. In addition to religious outgroups, these parties also sought to suppress leftist political factions associated with the working class, such as socialists, communists, and Christian socialists (Pollard, 2007, pp. 437–439). In contemporary politics, the resurgence of confessional illiberalism has primarily targeted the exclusion of ethno-religious groups such as Arab Muslims and Jews, and groups that threaten natalist policy, such as working women and LGBTQ+ communities.

Contemporary confessional illiberal parties mirror some of their interwar fascist predecessors, particularly in their strategic alignment with religion. The illustrative cases of the Italian PNF after 1929 and Hungary under the Unity Party (Egységes Párt) illustrate the mechanisms through which political elites co-opt religion for political gains. The alliance is rarely driven by genuine theological commitment. Instead, it is a calculated political strategy designed to unify a diverse (Christian) ingroup under an illiberal and nationalist framework. Through forging alliances with organizations rooted in moral authority, confessionally illiberal parties effectively mobilize support while reinforcing exclusionary illiberal policy.

5.1. PNF: A Strategic Alliance Between an Ideological Church and an Opportunistic Party

Starting in the late 1920s, institutionalized through the 1929 Lateran Accords, Benito Mussolini’s PNF pursued a strategic alliance with the Catholic Church. Despite tensions between Mussolini and Pope Pius XI, both opposed parliamentary liberalism, the appropriation of Church property (capitalism), and “godless” communism. The Church’s accommodation of the PNF became central to fascist consolidation, even as tensions boiled between Mussolini and the Church.

5.1.1. Cause for the Alliance: Shared Enemies

During the interwar period, Christian organizations—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—aligned with illiberal parties, including fascist movements, mainly in reaction to parliamentarization and liberalism, which they saw as fostering secularism (Pollard, 2007, p. 434). In Italy, the Catholic Church viewed liberal democracy as hostile to Christian traditions, while both Mussolini’s PNF and the Church feared communism. To the PNF, liberalism and communism threatened political stability; for the Church, Soviet-style atheism and secular reforms—such as divorce, abortion, and decriminalized homosexuality—undermined its moral authority (Stehle, 1982).

Despite Pope Pius XI’s wariness of Mussolini and Mussolini’s distaste for religion, the Church–Party alliance formed out of the need to suppress shared enemies (Webster, 1961). Yet, while the Church’s support for the PNF was ideological, the PNF’s support of the Church was strategic. Following the Lateran Accords, many Catholic People’s Party members joined the PNF, eliminating the remaining clerical opposition (Pollard, 2007, p. 436). The Church backed PNF policies, including its answer for “heartless capitalism”—corporatism—and its pronatalist policies implemented during the “Battle for Births” (1925–1938; De Grand, 1976, p. 957; Lyttelton, 2004; Pollard, 2007, p. 436). Though tensions persisted as evidenced by Pope Pius XI’s 1931

critique of Mussolini's nationalist (over Catholic) implementation of corporatism, the alliance endured, bound not through mutual admiration but by linkages forged through shared enemies (Pollard, 2007, p. 172).

5.2. The Hungarian Case: A Pluralist, yet Christian, Society

Like Italy, interwar Hungary was deeply religious, but unlike Italy, it was far from homogenously Catholic; two-thirds of the population identified as Catholic, while about 25% belonged to organized Protestant churches (Fazekas, 2004, p. 163). Despite its religious diversity, the ruling Unity Party (*Egységes Párt*) allied with organized Christianity, leveraging religious linkages to mobilize and consolidate power.

5.2.1. Causes Behind the Alliance: Christian Nationalism

Hungary, though nominally democratic, functioned as an autocracy under regent Miklós Horthy and the governing Unity Party. The party capitalized on disillusionment with the parliamentary liberalism of the Dualist period (1867–1918), socialism, and communism, particularly after the Treaty of Trianon and the brief 133-day communist regime of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (1919). It framed Hungary's territorial losses and decline as the result of “godless” ideologies that disrupted the nation's traditional social order (Fazekas, 2004, p. 162). This narrative, which continued from the pre-war period, positioned the Unity Party as the defender of Hungary's Christian and cultural heritage, lionizing motherhood and framing rampant issues of infant mortality, venereal disease, and abortions as issues of national survival in the face of diversity (Gál, 2023; Svégl, 2023).

Unlike the PNF, the Unity Party did not privilege a single denomination through a formal institutional alliance. Instead, it selectively and rhetorically embraced Christian identity as the foundation of Hungarian nationalism. The party:

Favoured agrarian over urban interests [without any land reform or state-led liberalization] and was coloured by an antisemitism that derived primarily from its religious and moral views. Its tendency to exclude was manifested by the common use of the adjective “Christian.” This ideology did not seek so much to determine who was a Christian as to determine who was not. (Fazekas, 2004, p. 164)

The party mobilized support for the regime through activating linkages established by Hungary's vast network of churches, mirroring the post-World War II Christian Democratic movements elsewhere (Kalyvas, 1996; Lorwin, 1971; van Kersbergen, 2003; see also Wittenberg, 2006). For religious organizations, the embrace of confessional illiberalism offered a chance to regain authority lost during the secular reforms of the Dualist period and following the collapse of the Christian Socialist movement. While Christian Socialists promoted social and economic reforms, Unity's emphasis on traditional hierarchies and chauvinistic nationalism resonated more broadly (Fazekas, 2004, p. 165; Halevy, 2024). Catholic and Protestant organizations set aside theological differences in favour of a shared nationalist agenda, prioritizing national identity over religious doctrine. Confessional illiberalism enabled the party to harness the Church's moral authority and organizational linkages to everyday people, securing support from Hungary's conservative rural electorate amid rising electoral competition while concealing “the class dictatorship” of the regime (Kardos, 1967, p. 444).

5.3. Targets of Confessional Illiberalism

In the interwar period, confessional illiberal parties targeted socialists, Romani, Jews, and other national minorities while promoting pronatalist policies. Party alliances with religious organizations legitimized exclusionary policies against perceived outgroups (Finke et al., 2017). Before examining how the policies of confessional illiberal parties target specific groups, we distinguish the relevance of the mechanisms unearthed from the historical cases to contemporary politics. In Italy and Hungary, nationalist parties successfully aligned with religion in the absence of democracy following a period of liberalization.

Today, confessional illiberal parties initially maintain alliances with religion within democratic frameworks and can use these linkages to subvert democratic norms and institutions after rising to power through democratic means (Kövér, 2015; Scheppele, 2022). Yet, we argue that the conceptual targets of confessional illiberalism remain consistent despite shifting demographics in Europe due to migration from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. These targets fall into two non-mutually exclusive categories: those who challenge the “Christian” homogeneity of the nation and those who threaten traditional family norms.

5.3.1. Historical Exclusion: Racialization of an Ethnic Group

As evidenced by the Hungarian and Italian cases, confessional ideas can be activated by illiberal opportunistic parties in the absence of parties’ ideological convictions to religious nativism. Historically, Jews were the primary targets as the largest politicized religious outgroup in much of Europe, particularly as racial antisemitism gained momentum in the 19th century. Today, Muslim migrants and other religious minorities, especially non-white ethno-religious minorities, face exclusionary policies under modern confessional illiberal regimes.

In Italy, the PNF did not initially target Jews. However, after the 1938 Racial Laws (Leggi Razziali) and the Manifesto of Race (Manifesto della Razza), Jews were stripped of citizenship, banned from intermarriage, public schools, the armed forces, and public employment (Livingston, 2014, p. 2). While the Catholic Church initially opposed racial antisemitism, it later justified discriminatory laws as protecting Italy’s Catholic culture (Pollard, 2007, p. 438). Antisemitism was not originally central to PNF policy but became integral once the party fully aligned with the Church in defense of Italy’s Catholic *and* national identity (Pollard, 2007, p. 438). This religious alliance weakened the dependence on the PNF’s civil infrastructure, which initially integrated Italy’s Jewish communities in support of the PNF (Pollard, 2007, p. 438).

On the other hand, Hungary was the first interwar European state to impose Jewish quotas in higher education, enacting *numerus clausus* in 1920, prior to the formation of the Unity Party (Kovács, 2023). Public and professional organizations followed, yet only after the regime “politicized religion” to build “a nation” (Turbucz, 2023). By the late 1930s, Jews and later Romani populations faced restrictions from schools, the military, unions, and cooperatives, all under the pretense of preserving Hungary’s Christian identity (Patai, 1996, pp. 544–547).

Initially, the Unity Party embraced aspects of racial antisemitism but distanced itself from the idea’s source, German National Socialism, by 1933. However, the Great Depression and the lackluster success of austerity measures strengthened fascist factions within the party and with it racial Jew-hate in sectors both dominated by the Jewish middle class (industry) and devoid of Jews (agriculture).

Unlike in Italy, far-right representatives of various Christian denominations in the party, not the Church, led the push for antisemitic laws, citing Christianity as a defining characteristic of the Hungarian nation-state (Kovács, 2023, pp. 24, 82–84; Patai, 1996, p. 545). Despite Miklós Horthy's antisemitism, he initially delayed exclusion due to economic reliance on Jewish communities. In an October 14, 1940, letter, he admitted:

As regards the Jewish problem, I have been an anti-Semite throughout my life....However, since one of the most essential tasks of the government is to raise the standard of living...it is impossible, in a year or two, to replace the Jews....This requires a generation at least. (Patai, 1996, p. 546)

In 1938, the First Jewish Law capped Jewish participation in commercial trade, medicine, engineering, law, and the press at 20% following mobilization from student groups and professional associations (Ungváry, 2012). The Second Jewish Law (1939) further reduced it to 6%, defining “Jew” by racial criteria, thereby extending restrictions to converts and those of partial Jewish descent (Kovács, 2023). Political expediency ultimately overrode economic concerns, aligning Hungary's policies with fascist and Nazi racial exclusion, all in the name of maintaining the homogeneity of Hungary as “Christian.”

In other words, the transition from clerical Jew-hate to racial antisemitism was not driven by international National Socialist alliances, but by the activation of religious linkages by either party-affiliated associations (Italy) or non-party-affiliated associations (Hungary), as they aligned with the party's nationalist interests.

5.4. Modern Confessional Illiberalism: Exclusion of Muslims and Misuse of Philosemitism

Confessional illiberal parties in contemporary Europe strategically weaponize religion to justify exclusionary policies. Due to historical reasons, Jews no longer comprise the second-largest ethno-religious outgroup in Europe, and therefore, these policies are mainly targeted at racialized Arab and Black Muslim migrants. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán frames the Fidesz government as the defender of “Christian Europe,” using this rhetoric to implement strict, yet selective, anti-migrant policies (Kövé, 2015, p. 142). Orbán's education policy further *de facto* deters the integration of migrants from religious outgroups (Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education), mirroring interwar Hungary's use of Christianity as an exclusionary nationalist marker in policy domains. The use of religious doctrine for exclusionary purposes results in the exclusion of more than just racialized migrants, but religious outgroups at large. Brubaker (2017, pp. 1193–1194, 1198) argues that far-right parties in Northern and Western Europe adopt philosemitism as a rhetorical tool against Islam, selectively activating liberal values such as women's and LGBTQ+ rights, to justify exclusion (Brubaker, 2017, p. 1202). Philosemitism tokenizes Jews, reinforcing rather than countering antisemitism (Kowner et al., 2023, p. 117). It also mischaracterizes similarities between Jewish and Islamic traditions, both of which face exclusion under Christian-inspired policies in the long run.

Unlike Orbán's autocratic Fidesz, Italy's ruling party, Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi), can be classified as a democratic confessional illiberal party—not necessarily undemocratic, but operating within democratic frameworks while selectively and rhetorically embracing Christian identity as the basis of Italian nationalism. It leverages its alliance with religious authority to gradually subvert liberal democratic norms as it redefines the boundaries of Italian national identity through rhetoric and exclusionary policy. Unlike Fidesz, the Fdi has yet to subvert democratic institutions, though it must be highlighted that Orbán's autocratization was initially procedurally

democratic and enabled by winning a super-majority in 2010, partially due to the mobilization of Christian Civic Circles (Greskovits, 2020).

To secure power, Orbán consolidated party politics on the political *and* religious right. The ruling party, Fidesz, subsumed its early coalition partner, the Christian Democratic People's Party (Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt). The Christian Democratic People's Party, which has not been able to pass the electoral threshold without an electoral coalition since 1994, once embraced the interwar variations of political Catholicism, yet today its presence in politics is purely symbolic and an ode to the Christian nature of the governing Fidesz party. Yet, under Orbán, Fidesz's linkages with organizations do not stop with defunct parties. Orbán, a political Christian governing one of the least religious countries in Europe with only 17% church attendance (Mitchell, 2018), is supported and financially supports conservative policy think tanks such as the Danube Institute and the Századvég Foundation.

In its mission statement, the Danube Institute writes that it "has been committed from its foundation to three philosophical loyalties: a respectful conservatism in cultural, *religious*, and social life, the broad classical liberal tradition in economics, and a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy" (Danube Institute, n.d., emphasis added). These think tanks discuss little theology and instead, like in the interwar period, religion is used as a tool of legitimization and as an exclusionary marker; it does "not seek so much to determine who was a Christian as to determine who was not" (Fazekas, 2004, p. 164).

As the absorption of the Hungarian Christian Democrats illustrates, the electoral success of confessional illiberalism is also determined by the presence or absence of moderate conservative parties in the political system and whether they collude, are absorbed, or compete with an illiberal confessional party. Elite commitment to democracy is key. As Weitz (2024, p. 158) teaches us:

Hitler and the Nazis were saved from oblivion by a small clique of powerful men around President Hindenburg....This deal marked the ultimate alliance of the traditional and radical right. The traditionalists shared with the Nazis a visceral hatred, not just of Socialism and Communism, but of democracy itself. They both wanted to destroy the left and rebuild Germany's great power status.

As we show above, autocratization and confessional illiberalism are related but conceptually distinct (Table 2). Fdi seeks to reinforce Christian cultural dominance through restrictive and punitive immigration policies and by introducing policy measures that limit Islamic religious practices, such as tightening bureaucratic barriers to the construction of mosques and Islamic cultural centers. In 2023, following the closure of a Milan school for Eid al-Fitr, accommodating 40% of its student body, Fdi proposed legislation restricting non-Christian holidays in schools, and Fdi Senator La Russa defended the proposal to uphold "majority" Christian traditions. European confessional illiberal parties are rhetorically religious while fundamentally nationalist, using Christianity as a veneer to justify policies that disproportionately target and tokenize racialized ethno-religious outgroups (though the elements of these groups change through time). Their alliances with religion are opportunistic and socially conservative (Geva, 2024) yet lack a genuine theological commitment.

Like Weitz (2024), we expect that competitive pressures from moderate-right-wing parties or pro-democratic Christian democratic parties will likely curb the ability of confessional illiberal parties to lock in realignment and accelerate democratic decay. A large body of literature shows that an open electoral system with a garden

variety of right-wing parties paired with an elite commitment to democracy can diffuse and tame extremism (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Guasti & Bustikova, 2023; Kalyvas, 1996; Minkenberg, 2002; Ziblatt, 2017).

5.4.1. Pronatalism: The War on Reproductive Rights and the LGBTQ+ Community

The reconstruction of post-war Europe was a natalist nationalist project; the “sovereignty of the nation was symbolically located in women’s bodies and in the bodies of children” (Zahra, 2011, p. 334). Contemporary nationalist parties are less overt than their fascist predecessors, who experimented with programs like Mussolini’s “Battle for Births,” but promote similar goals under the guise of Christian values packaged with confessional illiberalism. Women and sexual minorities remain key targets of modern confessional illiberal parties’ pronatalist agendas.

Parties like Hungary’s Fidesz and Italy’s FdI use family policy to enforce traditional, heterosexual norms in the name of a Christian Hungary or Catholic Italy. As Sata (2023) shows, Viktor Orbán’s rhetoric increasingly centers on women’s reproductive roles, invoking 19th-century social conservatism to contest gender equality. Since 2015, Christianity has been reframed from a symbol of Hungarian cultural identity to a racialized marker, aligned with “replacement” theories that depict migrants as demographic as well as cultural threats. In this context, pronatalist measures—such as lifelong tax exemptions for women with four or more children, large forgivable loans, and vehicle subsidies for heterosexual couples—reinforce a narrow Christian family model (Geva, 2024, p. 16; Serdült, 2019, p. 12).

In April 2024, the Italian parliament approved legislation allowing anti-abortion groups’ access to abortion facilities to discourage women from terminating pregnancies. This move aligns with broader efforts to reinforce traditional gender roles and restrict reproductive autonomy. Both governments have also introduced anti-transgender legislation. In 2020, Hungary banned legal gender recognition by requiring gender to be fixed at birth in official documents, creating institutional barriers to access for transgender individuals (Amnesty International, 2020). In 2021, Hungary passed a law modeled on Russia’s 2013 legislation, restricting the depiction of LGBTQ+ identities in educational materials and media accessible to minors (Geva, 2024, p. 16). The FdI under Giorgia Meloni has similarly targeted LGBTQ+ families, including bans on parental recognition for same-sex couples and restrictions on overseas adoption and surrogacy. These policies idealize a narrow, heteronormative family model and form part of a broader strategy to shape a culturally homogeneous national identity.

In the postwar and especially post-Communist eras, churches in Hungary and Italy lost the mass mobilizing power they once held, and cultural identity eclipsed religious faith amid declining religiosity. Yet, the strategic alliance between organized religion and nationalist parties has allowed confessional illiberal actors to translate cultural conservatism into law through legal and parental advocacy groups, shaping the nation through the construction of “the right kind of” family in the name of the Christian nation.

6. Conclusion

This article defines confessional illiberalism in relation to two other illiberalisms, all ideal types: prejudicial and reactionary. Prejudicial illiberalism originates in individual-level resentment, reactionary illiberalism in policy backlash, and confessional illiberalism in epistemic revolt against modernity. Pronatalist policies, state

endorsement of traditional family values, and heteronormative sexuality geared towards protecting the ingroup Christian nation are defining features of confessional illiberalism—a model of governance that merges the state with illiberal socially conservative parties, religiously infused advocacy networks, churches, and affiliated organizations.

While its historical roots trace back to interwar fascism, confessional illiberalism is less overtly violent and militant. Rather than pursuing national rebirth in the fascist sense, it is primarily concerned with the numerical preservation of the nation through ingroup birth and outgroup expulsion, in response to post-World War II fertility declines.

In the interwar period, religion became a powerful ally of illiberal parties that seized states. Confessional illiberalism is not based on religious theology. Rather, religious rhetoric serves as a strategic political instrument that rests on a fusion of religious and party interests to promote a thick ideology rooted in moral, spiritual, and national belonging. Unlike in the past, it does not require the cooperation of religious leadership. Confessional linkages are formed between political parties and intermediary actors, such as advocacy groups and (un)civil society organizations, with religious rhetoric employed as a strategic instrument of political mobilization.

Confessional illiberalism exhibits several ideological affinities with fascism, including a rejection of modernity, an opposition to Karl Popper's principle of scientific falsifiability, and a disdain for lifestyles perceived as decadent. Like fascism, it repudiates the modern secular and liberal state (Hanson & Kopstein, 2024). Despite differences, both confessional illiberalism and fascism are driven by a vision of national rejuvenation, framed in contemporary discourse as a promise to make the nation "great again." This hinges on conserving traditional family roles through the deliberate commitment to increase fertility rates of the national ingroup, while excluding racialized ethno-religious groups from national membership.

Whereas fascism openly embraced authoritarianism, contemporary illiberalism seeks to legitimize itself through ostensibly democratic processes while manipulating representative institutions. Elections play a pivotal role in illiberal regimes; however, short electoral cycles threaten a long-term conservative agenda. Illiberal parties' fear of being ousted can lead to electoral manipulation and autocratization. To entrench confessional illiberalism, ruling parties, with the help of advocacy groups, overhaul reproductive regulatory frameworks and policy that eventually alter personal preferences about child-rearing and motherhood as communal obligations and commitment to national growth. When hearts change, minds follow at the ballot box (Green et al., 2004).

Confessional illiberalism molds policies to form a polity. It construes a homogenous and exclusionary national identity grounded in traditional religious narratives, supported by intermediary religious (un)civil organizations. An important distinction with nationalism is the strategic use of religious rhetoric and symbols to delineate the nation's boundaries to exclude political adversaries. Nationalist mobilization demarcates ethnic boundaries (for a discussion, see Mylonas & Tudor, 2023, pp. 6–7). Confessional illiberalism, a form of religious nationalism (Gorski, 2022), targets ethno-religious minorities *but also* women and LGBTQ+ groups through exclusionary legal frameworks. The cornerstone of confessional illiberalism is a regulation of reproduction as a physical foundation of the "Christian" nation.

Confessional illiberalism has a global appeal that rests on offering a longstanding social contract that upholds state support for ingroup traditional heterosexual families and asserts moral authority. Confessional illiberal parties today form more institutionalized “alliances” not with religion but with religious civil organizations through vehicles such as industry-funded religious lobbying groups and legal advocacy organizations (Wuest & Last, 2024). Some of these organizations coordinate activities via transnational advocacy networks that offer scripts to parties to instill elements of illiberalism globally. Socially conservative activists without borders also offer guidelines and templates to embed conservative policies into the regulatory and legislative frameworks (Bustikova & Guasti, 2024; Curanović, 2021; Desperak, 2023; Fábíán & Korolczuk, 2017; Southworth, 2024).

State interventions in reproductive policies have long been a subject of political and ideological significance. For instance, Nazi Germany’s *Lebensborn* program was involved in the abduction of children with Aryan features from Eastern Europe to increase the population of Germany. In March 2025, President Donald Trump referred to himself as a “fertilization President” to celebrate Women’s History Month while promoting efforts to expand access to in vitro fertilization treatments (Sheth, 2025). Already in his first term as president, he reinforced the religious tint to his nationalism by elevating Paula White, a controversial televangelist and Christian nationalist, to a leadership role within the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Originally established in 2001 by President George W. Bush, the Faith Office was designed to facilitate collaboration between the government and religious or community organizations in addressing social issues.

Confessional illiberalism is strategic, not theocratic. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan strategically employs religion to consolidate political power, but he does not seek to transform the country into an Islamist state. Erdoğan’s primary objective is to preserve a conservative social order while suppressing the rights of minority groups, particularly the Kurds. Erdoğan has utilized Sunni Islam, the dominant sect among Turks, as a unifying force to strengthen the national ingroup (Karaveli, 2016). He has also leveraged this religious affiliation to justify actions aimed at curbing dissent, including cracking down on the media, altering education curricula to align with conservative values, and prosecuting political opponents.

Israel, a state that considers itself the only liberal democracy in the Middle East, has recently embraced a dangerous form of confessional illiberalism as Benjamin Netanyahu sought to form a governing coalition in 2022, amidst corruption charges and an impending trial. The coalition was formed not out of the religious convictions of either Netanyahu or his governing party, but the nationalist interests of the party and self-interest on behalf of its leader. Netanyahu’s party, Likud, aligned with far-right religious nationalist parties and ultra-Orthodox interests in 2022 in favor of continued state support for natalist policy, religious education, welfare (including child benefits), conscription exemptions to ultra-Orthodox, and subversions to the rule of law for the non-Jewish. Therefore, confessional illiberalism can thrive in various denominations. Further research that compares the manifestation of confessional illiberalism across regions and regimes is therefore warranted.

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